The Luck O'Lady Joan

Josephine Daskam Bacon

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BY

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CHICAGO

F. G. BROWNE & CO.

1913

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PUBLISHED, SEPTEMBER, 1913

4325

THE·PLIMPTON·PRESS
NORWOOD·MASS·U·S·A

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YOU may be certain that this tale is perfectly true, my dears, for I had it from the grandmother of my grandmother's grandmother straight down to me. And it came as straight to the longest dead of all these good women (and from as far behind her, too) you may rest assured, or I'd scorn to tell it. I have no patience myself with these mushroom tales, made hot over night by boys hardly used to their breeches yet, you might say; they may do for the children, to bring

on the eye-shutting hour, but for us with the taste o' life still hot (or, it may be cooling) in our mouths and a handful of wrinkles spreading out templewards — no, no! Well ripened, as all men will have their wine, and the wise their women, for our tales, if you please. And now to this one.

Of all the misers that ever laid one farthing on another and went hungry for a third to warm the two with, old Dudleigh Hartover of Hartover Chine was surely the stingiest and the meanest. And half-brother to a lord, too, but deadly ashamed of it, for fear something should be expected of him on account of his station. He lived in a low, miserable cottage that was more like a hut, to say the truth, at the very end of the family estates; and as the family

dwelt overseas in France, and had for a generation, preferring that country and being really Norman at heart, as many were, even in those times, it was nigh forgotten who he was — well forgotten by the family, who despised him too much to feel ashamed for him, you see, and made use of him only through a factor to collect their great rents.

He had by him his only grandson, an orphan, and a fine lad, straight as a wand and open handed, by contrary, as the old fellow was close. Not that he would have kept him, be sure, except that with his rheumatism and poor sight, he must have had some one to look to the pig, and fetch the water and wood, and make ways in the snow, and tend the cabbages and potatoes in the unthrifty gar-

den patch; and who else would do it for a straw bed and a bowl of porridge and a handful of nuts, I ask you? Young Dudleigh knew no better fare and thought in his honest, foolish young heart he was much in debt to his grandfather for his support. And are they the only couple of that sort that ever you heard of?

Now these were the days of the old religion, and though I that tell you this am on t' other side of the fence now, too many of my grandmothers cleaned their hearts with holy water for me to have aught but kindness for what my grandchildren tell me I must hate like the Old Gentleman himself! But they have not got to the age when all the roads to heaven join into the one lane that dips over churchyard hill, and after that,

I'm thinking, there'll be plenty of all kinds to give a hand to, and it's not a whiff o' the incense that'll keep us apart! It's my own grandmother was an Irishwoman, besides, and for the life of me I cannot keep my face straight sometimes when I see the Reverend James and his eleven daughters go up the street — thinking on the sly wit of the wicked old dear in such cases. Not that she grudged them heaven, deary me, no! If a parson with eleven unmarried girls had no heavenly deserts, she knew not who had, she was used to say!

Well, then, those being the old days, and things as they were, you will not, I am sure, be surprised at what I am going to tell you. Off on the downs there dwelt a tidy old body, so old and forsaken

that her name had long been forgotten — if indeed, she held the right to any name. In her middle age she had kept the fowls for a great inn that had used to flourish near by, so she came to be called the hen-wife, and the name stuck to her, as they say, and by it she was known. She was crippled and went with a crutch, and a good half of her time she must be upon her back, though for the rest she was spry enough, and would have fared ill but for the neighbors and gossips of those parts, who would send her a bit here and a bit there, and leave faggots bound for her to pick up on her way and a handful of meal for her black hen. And little they lost by it, I can tell you, for they got her prayers in return, and that was something.

For this poor, bent old creature,

ready for the palsy, nearly deaf, often empty, and oftener cold, was strangely dear to those you and I will never see this side of heaven — namely, what my grandmother called (though I must not) the Blessed Saints. It has always been so, my grandmother would say, and just why They pick and choose as They do we shall never know; but it seemed as though what this old hen-wife lost in worldly comfort and honor, that very same was made up to her in the pride and glory of heaven; for to her in visions came often and often the blessed St. Barnabas and would relate to her more of the doings of Paradise than you or I could learn going backwards to Rome with peas in both shoes — as my grandmother said. Though mind you, I do not hold with that, and

am, moreover, weak-stomached at sea, and cannot feel that the Lord would drive me there for his glory or my salvation.

Now the hen-wife loved a dish of gossip as well as the next, and since she had none of this earth to amuse her, the good St. Barnabas would always have some tasty bit of chat for her that was none the less a heavenly visitation because it was not all prayers, you understand. And one night when she had suffered more than common with her back and was in great need of a little cheering, the kind saint had a fine tale for her, when she was gone off to what you would call her sleep and my grandmother called her vision.

"Do you know," says he, "any especially virtuous maid about these parts by name of Joan?"

"That do I, your honor," says the hen-wife, "for sure it must be Joan the tinker's daughter, and a fairer, better hearted maid never put her bare foot to the ground, for it's never a shoe the poor child owns since she was born. As gentle as a pigeon, and good — oh, the Blessed Virgin should know how good the girl is, for she's as pure as snow."

"The Blessed Virgin knows it well," says St. Barnabas, "and I promise you it is on her mind, hen-wife. It seems that this girl's father has just died and she is to be turned out into the world, and the winter coming on, and she with nowhere to go and not a friend that can help her. Now all this troubled Our Lady, and that was clear as glass. Well, they made music for her, and fruits of all

colors (to see them even in a picture, 'twould blind you, hen-wife, but you can think o' church windows and the sun going down) but no, 'twas of no use at all. So St. John was got to ask her and find out why the Queen of Heaven should be troubled.

"'Oh, St. John!' says she, 'they tell me that harm is like to come to that poor tinker's daughter that has had me in her heart since Father Victor first taught her to say a Hail Mary! All her days she has served and praised me and now she is cast out alone, and lovely as one of my own angels! What honor is there in honoring Mary if those that do it come to this?'

"'Madam and Queen,' says St. John, 'this shall not be so. I myself will see that this maid shall be rich and powerful, and a noble

lady in the world, and that within the year. Will this be pleasing to the Queen of Heaven?'

"So then Our Lady thanked him most courteously, and smiled again, and you can envy that lucky girl with all your heart, hen-wife, for the thing is as good as done when St. John has it on his mind."

Well, that was a piece of news, perhaps! The old hen-wife had never seen Joan in the face, but she had heard of her, as you see, and glad she was that such piety was to have its reward; for it was said that the girl had never missed Mass in the bitterest weather, and her barefoot!

Now in a while the hen-wife was over her fit of sickness for that season, and she got herself up from bed and started out with her crutch looking for faggots. She had more

strength in her old legs than ordinary that day, and she walked across the moor and over by Hartover Chine and stopped by the miser's cottage to get her breath and may be (for she did not know him, you see) a taste of something to fill her. Old Dud — for that was what they called him, having mostly forgotten his birth — stood in the doorway and glowered at her as she stopped.

"Good-day to ye, neighbor," says she, "God be good to ye!"

"As to that," answers Old Dud gruffly, "I know naught of it. If God helps any, it's them that helps themselves, to my thought."

"Or their neighbors," says the hen-wife, "as I know you will when I tell you that I'm empty since night."

"In that case," says he, stepping

back into the hut, "I'm glad it's not me that has the filling of ye, with meal what it is, and the pig not killed yet!"

With that he shut the door in her face, and she was starting on, near whimpering with the disappointment, when out jumped Young Dud, who had heard all this, and thrust at her his tin of cold porridge.

"Here, granny," says he, "take part of my dinner, and don't mind him, will ye, now?"

So they sat behind the hut, and the hen-wife got to talking, as women will, and "Oh," says she, "I wish you the luck of Joan the tinker's daughter, boy dear, and there's no one living could have better, for the Virgin herself's behind it."

Then he must know what it was,

and she told him all St. Barnabas had told her, and it went in one ear and out the other, as they say, with the careless boy. But she told it to two, for Old Dud was at the back window and heard every word, and when the hen-wife was leaving he was far on his way before her. He bustled along over the ground, asking his way from all, and was often as not getting wrong answers, he was so disliked, till at last he found a lovely young girl weeping under a tree and when he asked her if she knew aught of Joan the tinker's daughter she wept the harder, and said it was her name, but that the tinker was no more.

"Never you mind, my dear," says Old Dud, heaving a sigh of relief that he was the first to get her, "for from this day on, I'm your father, and will provide for

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you as if you were one of my own!"

The poor child was too simple to see that this fusty old fellow in soiled and ragged clothes was not likely to put her very far forward in the world, but curtsied sweetly to him and kissed his grimy hand out of gratitude and felt that she had found a friend indeed.

"There's but one thing," said Old Dud, "that I shall ask of you, and that's to go with me before the notary and make over to me all your fortune present and future, and then I'll agree to keep you as one of my own, as I said."

Then poor Joan must needs laugh, for she had but the chemise and petticoat she stood in, her father's tinkering kettle, and a lame duck she had tended from a gosling, for all her fortune. But Old Dud

cared little for her laughing. He went with her to the notary and paid out a silver coin for papers binding them both, and the neighbors nearly split themselves with mirth and mocked them all the way home.

Now when Joan got to the tumble-down hut and saw the dirty floor and the black hearth and the smoky walls, I suppose you are thinking that her heart fell and that she wished herself back on the clean moor-lands, but wait a bit!

"Here is good work for a woman, dear father," says she, "it is easy to see you need some one about, as much as I need a home," and she fell to work with water from the spring, so that when Young Dud came back from his snaring, with a fine young rabbit for supper, he found the floor fresh, the hearth

shining with clean coppers, the straw heaped new in the beds, and green boughs against the stained walls.

"Here is a sister for you, boy," said the old miser, in his surly way, "and she must e'en take the loft, I suppose, and you come down with me. Do you clean the rabbit and see if she can cook it for us, and no words."

Joan made them roasted cakes of meal with their supper, and they ate from a clean pan, which pleased Young Dud, though he knew not what it was that pleased him. After supper she washed the pots and made all tidy and they went to their beds. But Young Dud could not sleep so sound as was his wont, for it seemed to him that he heard footsteps and water poured, and at last he opened his eyes and

saw some one moving in the bright moon-light, and looking carefully, he knew that it was Joan, clad only in the tattered quilt that lay on her straw. It was hung like a mantle over her and as she moved softly about and wrung the water from the clothes she was washing, her shoulders and small breasts, as white as curds, gleamed, and the slender calves of her strong young legs. You see, the poor child had but the two garments, and she must get them clean, for she was as neat as a white weasel. Young Dud would have liked to watch her very closely, but for some reason he felt that he should not, so he smothered his eyes in the straw and tried to sleep. But he could not, and had to listen to her small bare feet on the stone floor and her sighs as she lifted the

heavy kettle she had brought from her father.

Soon there was a stillness and then he knew that her work was over and he slept.

In the morning before he was awake she was dressed, and when his grandfather asked gruffly for the porridge she shook her head and smiled.

"But not before Mass!" says she, and then, "Do you not remember 'tis Christmas Day?"

The old fellow growled in his dirty beard that he held by none of that, but when she said sweetly, "But you, brother, will surely go with me?" Young Dud blushed and halted and went at last, much to the joy of good Father Victor, who had nigh given him up for an idle, bird's nesting fellow, bound for a worse end.

It was a late winter that year, and long remembered for its merciful warmth. Scarcely had the snow come ere it was gone, and no day but you could find some green thing in the wood. All these plants and roots Joan knew, for her grandmother was a Normandy woman, and they can make soup from a stone, as they say. Leaves and roots would she boil and make strong tea to help Old Dud's rheums and pains, and savory messes to give a smack to their porridge. She planted vines and green things in old broken crocks, too, and the heat of the cottage brought them into bloom. And she did more. For many years, Old Dud had sold his pig, for the boy was wilful and would not help in the killing, so they got but little out of it. But at Joan's request he helped

his grandfather in the business, and when the animal was ready for her she cut and carved with her strong brown hands, and sold a half for salt, and of the rest she packed away in a pit in the ground enough to feed them well for the winter. And she made a feast out of the head, and laid away the feet in strong brine, and stuffed the entrails with a noble mixture of herbs she had picked, and bits of sweet bark, and melted down enough rich fat for all their dry meal cakes. And when Old Dud, rubbing his hands at the saving thriftiness of her, and scolding if a drop of the fat boiled over the tinker's kettle (he would never buy one for himself) agreed at last that no more could be squeezed from the pig, she gave a sly smile, and bade her brother pick up the

bloody skin from the ground and carry it for her to the charcoal burners' pit in the wood. And then she bargained with them for white lime, which they had always by them, and they gave her a sackful for the skin, which they knew how to cure with charcoal. So she made a tight broom of withes, and mixed the lime with water, and Young Dud washed the cottage with it, inside and out, under her orders, till it was like new sea sand, and sweet as could be. And the sack she washed and steeped in a certain bark till it turned red, and made herself a hood to wear to Mass.

Now Young Dud had come to look forward most lovingly to the night before the Sunday, for then Joan washed out her poor clothes, clad in the quilt, and he would

steal one look only at her whiteness and then, his eyes to the straw. But at last, for he was a good lad, though a bit thoughtless —as many a good lad has been since — he took shame for his grandfather's meanness, and spoke to him.

"Grandfather," says he, "they say you have a good bit of gold laid by from all this rent you will be always squeezing from the neighbors for the factor, and for myself, I care naught for it. But this poor girl has but one smock, and that she must be washing when we sleep; and she has made us as fine a cottage by now as any neighbor's, and rich, tasty hams, and broths for your aches, and as good as got me into heaven with all these Masses; and I think you should be at the cost of a gown for

her, I do indeed, and a pair of stout leather shoes, for we are in her debt."

Well, at first the old man would hear nothing of it, and stormed and raged, but at last he agreed that if the lass knew how to spin, he would get her all the wool she could use, from a shepherd that was deep in his books, and a great wheel from the joiner's wife, who was too old to use hers, and owed him also. And if she could make herself clothes from that, well and good. Young Dud was none too well pleased with this arrangement, but Joan was delighted, and spun all day, standing at the great wheel, so that it was not many Sundays but she had a fine warm petticoat and frock; and when in her gratitude she told her new father that she had started a warm blanket

for him, he was moved to shame, and going to the great chest under his bed, with many groans and back steps and regrets, he reached down and handed her a silver coin and bade her get herself leather shoes from the cobbler.

"How good your father is to me," says she to Young Dud, on the way to Mass, "and why he should be so, I cannot see. There is nothing I lack, now, and all through him."

Young Dud did not tell her that she was the first to call his grandfather good, nor did he add that the old miser's reasons for adopting her were hard indeed to guess, to one who knew him.

Soon each bed had a warm blanket, and no feet went cold in that house, for when Joan was not spinning she was knitting, and

always with a homelike song on her red lips. So that the old miser had for nothing at all what many a man has paid high for and never got — the woman who will sing and spin together. For there are many who are glad to do the one, as my grandmother said, and many who are forced to do the other, but few who joy in both. And he who bargains for the one and lets the other go, is a fool, and he who makes sure of the other, resigning the one, will be seeking what he misses elsewhere, e'er long, she said, for though home without the one is gray, without the other 'tis very hell. And seeing this, many go bachelor, she told me.

Now by spring more had happened in the cottage. For once again Young Dud went to his grandfather and spoke.

"Sir," said he, "I do not know if you notice it, but now that we are so trim and clean at home, and Joan in her new hood and petticoat, and the very pig-sty whitened, I think we must blush for our rags. Mine she hath patched till they can no more, and yours would never bear the water to them. Could you not give me new wearing gear by Easter? For the neighbors speak to me now, at Mass, and I am ashamed."

Well, then the old fellow raved and scolded, I promise you! Not a penny would he give, not he. So they kept warm, what more could they ask? Was he made of money? And such like, till he had tired himself. But at last, since the boy stood firm, and said he would sell his rabbits and not bring them home for supper, Old

Dud stamped away to his great chest and with grunts and groans drew out two good sets of clothes, many years old, but firm and fine, and when they had each put them on, you would never have known them, so well-to-do and comfortable they looked. And Joan seized the old rags, ere his grandfather had time for repentance, and washed them and made a warm set of cushions for his seat in the chimney from them.

And then an odd thing happened, for with the decent gear the old miser took on himself some decent pride again, and when he was off on his next collection and a saucy girl called to her mate to see Old Dud in his grand clothes, he turned and shook his cane at her and snarled out,

"Here is Dudleigh o' Hartover,

wench, and you'll do well to mind it from this on!"

And partly in jest and partly because he held title to the name, after all, and was known to have saved, the neighbors began to give him his name again, whch pleased his grandson mightily, for they called him Young Hartover, now, and the girls lingered to talk with him, nor did their mothers forbid it, now he was grown steady.

So before they knew it, the spring was on them, and Joan sold the joiner's wife a pair of wool stockings for a setting of eggs, and put them under her duck, and soon had a fine hatching. And some of them she exchanged for hens, and the eggs she sold for seeds, and she set her brother to digging up the rough and weedy garden-patch, and by the end of

March there was a neat, smooth bed all ready to keep them that summer. So that now there was no cottage all around to equal it for thrift and bloom, and she was notable among the neighbors for her soups and bark-drinks and firm-knit hose. But never a penny did she take in money, but always in kind, so that naught went into the great chest, but yet the old man took nothing out.

And toward the end of her life my grandmother would always be saying that for this sort of earning Eve was planned — namely, not for picking, which was her (and our) damnation, but for planting and tending, in the which had she persisted, our salvation had been sure without so much work for the Blessed Saints. But many hold differently today, they tell me.

Now as I say, 't was the end of March, and the old man went forth on his collecting, which was at this season a matter of some days. So the two young ones were left together. And in the evening, the moon being full, they walked across the fields, hand in hand, as was their wont, toward the brook, to see if there were any water-eels in the traps, for Joan had promised to cook him a fine, rich mess in return for all his garden labor. And at first they talked, but soon they grew still, and at last when they were come to the brook they clean forgot their errand thither, but only stared at the silver ripples on it and sighing, turned home again.

But that night Dudleigh could not sleep at all, but lay and tossed under his blanket, and heard Joan rise many times in the night to

pray, and even heard her words as she kneeled in the moon-light, and it seemed she must be thanking the Virgin continually for her happiness and comfort in this her home, and begging Our Lady to keep her always as Herself, pure and humble, nor to let her grow proud or hard, with content and joy. And just before the dawn she dressed herself and slipped out softly, but not too softly for him to hear her, for in a twinkling he was after her, and caught her wading the brook, hunting green cresses, just as the sun rose.

"What, are you here, brother?" she cried, and dropped her petticoat over her rosy knees, all cold from the icy water.

"Yes, I am here," said he, "for I could not sleep in the night, but Joan, why do you call me brother?"

"Because your grandfather bade me," says she, "and no sister could love you more than I do, Dudleigh, indeed."

"And that is true, too," says the silly boy, holding her hands, full of the green fresh cresses, and staring at her as if he had never seen her before, "and no more could any brother love you more than I."

"Then shall we always be together, dear brother?" says she, "for that would please me."

"And me," says he, "I could never leave you for a day, it seems to me. Come out of the brook, Joan."

And as she came out he put his arm tight about her so that his hand fell over her heart, and they walked over the grass more like one body than two, so closely were

they linked, and all in a moment they kissed each other, mouth to mouth, and knew no more where they were walking or how, but the cresses fell scattered about her rosy feet.

Then as they clung in that kiss, with the great sun all red and misty about them, and the morning dew heavy on their hair, the tinkling sheep came curiously upon them and behind these came the sleepy shepherd, and with him a traveling friar, of whom there were many in those days. And he, stepping smartly up to them, plucked Dudleigh by the shoulder as one would pull a honey bee out from a wallflower, and asked him what he did.

"I was but kissing my sister, sir," says the boy.

"Ha!" says the friar, "many a

brotherly kiss have I seen, but none so long as that, for you are at it since I topped the hill, here. Now, my children, this is all wrong, unless ye mean it rightly. And if ye do so, then Mother Church hath no objection to all such kissings, but rather the contrary."

"Then what would you have me do, father?" says Dudleigh in a daze.

"Why, marry the maid, to be sure," says the friar briskly, "and soon, if I am to judge by this kiss of yours. And talk not to me of brothers and sisters, son, for I was not born yesterday!"

Well, the upshot of all this was, as you may guess, that this busy friar married them then and there, thinking them wandering gypsies (with them too senseless from love to undeceive him) and the shep-

herd was the witness, with his son, who knew them well.

"And now my children," says he, "you may kiss as long as you like, and Our Lady will bless you at it, you may take my word. And this time next year, if I come by again, let me bless three Christians instead of two!"

So thus was Joan wed, and if the cottage had been home before, it was heaven now.

But when Old Dudleigh came back, he was near crazy with anger at all this, for he had never dreamt of it, I promise you. Never had he for one moment forgotten his reasons for adopting the maid (that was now no more a maid, be sure) namely, the hopes he built on the hen-wife's vision; for though he believed in no holy things, to obey them, and had not been to confes-

sion in forty years, yet strange to say, he would have staked his all on this chance to get poor Joan's great luck, and was counting the days till the year should expire and St. John fulfil his bargain. And he was not the only one of that kidney, neither, for his sort are the first to believe tales that many a good Christian might be excused for doubting.

But what was he to do? The thing was done, and all his snarling could not put back the clock nor restore Joan's blushes, so he grumbled in his beard at his grandson for a fool and bade him make his peace with heaven, for the old fellow firmly believed that the youth would meet with an accident and die before the year was out, to give St. John room for his promises, you see.

But Young Dudleigh paid no heed to his mutterings, but by little and little took the charge of the collections on himself, and urged by Joan, learned to read and write, that he might be sure of the rights of things when Old Dudleigh should be no more. But she would not learn herself, for she had no time, she said, nor was it needful; in which way of thinking my grandmother declared herself to be, for she said, until Eve had her first learning of the Serpent, she was happy and content, but with her knowledge lost she Paradise.

So Joan worked in her garden and tended her fowls and became much loved in all the neighborhood, and indeed, respected, for her housewifery and skill in sickness; and when it was plain to see

that before another spring she would be dandling in her arms what now she carried near her heart, then indeed she had the good wishes of all, and little gifts and messages from far and near, and even the old miser was forgiven for her sake.

But as the summer drew to a close, this old miser grew uneasy and sourer than before. He knew naught of Joan's hopes, for his senses were failing, and he did not see what was very plain by autumn, for he grumbled at her growing hunger and found many occasions to complain of her waste and idleness, if ever her knitting slackened and she paused to dream on the future or spared herself in garden labors. Soon he began to drop strange hints and mutterings of the time being nearly up and would

ask her of a sudden if she had met any great lord a-hunting in the wood, or if she did not plan to show herself in the market-town, "for," says he, "I have put up with you a long time now, and been at great costs with all this cottage-whitening and flower-gardening and extra food and new clothes for us all, and I tell ye, girl, I look for my return!"

Then Joan would shrink from him and cross herself, for the poor child thought his wits were going, and she must be brave for two, now.

That year they paid for the last one with bitter cold from Michaelmas on, and the snow came early, and the black frost bit into the ground. Now Old Dudleigh must keep the house, and he watched his grandson's wife through nar-

row, hateful eye-lids, and he worried at her as a terrier worries a mouse, till she was nigh crazy with him. But she did not let her husband know all this, and trusted to the child's coming to soften his flinty heart. So it went on till Christmas Eve, and she was very heavy now, and looked for her hour at any moment with an anxious heart, though well she knew there was more than one neighbor all ready to come to her through the blinding snow. And as she stood by the fire, the light flickered over her, and Old Dudleigh winked and stared and scowled.

"What's come to ye, mistress?" he snarled. "Ye grow wonderful plump on my poor food, it seems. You'll catch no lord with that shape, I promise you! You that are hand-in-glove with heaven, will

ye tell Them up there that I'm at the end o' my patience? How's our bargain, eh? Where's your fortune?"

"What is it that you mean, father?" she cried. "Do not be so harsh with me, and my son to be born tonight, may be! You know well that I want no lord but my own good man that is off to get me a cradle this very evening! Will you not be kind to me, father, as you were at first? 'T is Christmas Eve, when Our Lady was the same as I am now, though she must be in a stable, and I am at home and warm."

Then an awful look came on Dudleigh Hartover's face and a black list of curses on his wicked old mouth.

"Aha!" says he, "so that is how I'm tricked! Another mouth

at my food! Another cold body to warm in my bed! And the lying saints at the bottom of it! No fortune at all! No lord at all! Nor ever will be, I see now. Well, well, the year's up, so out ye go, hussy, and follow Our Lady to a stable if ye can. You're none o' mine nor your brat, neither. Out with you! Out!"

And he pushed her weeping and praying, out of the door, and barred it against her. And though he heard her whimpering around the cottage and crying for her husband, and that she was already in her pains, he set his wicked old jaw the harder, and cursed all the saints and especially St. John.

Now as he sat in a doze by the chimney, he heard a tapping on the pane, and turning his head he saw the old hen-wife looking in,

and he rushed to the door and seized her by her skinny shoulders and shook her till her gums rattled and threw her backwards in the snow.

"You lying wife," he screamed at her, "what do ye here? What want ye?"

"A place to die in, Hartover," says the hen-wife, chattering with the cold. "Our Lady's called me and I'll soon be with her in glory. You'll not let me die in the snow?"

"That I will then," says he grimly, "and make no doubt She's lied to you as she lied about the girl Joan, and her luck."

"Nay, Hartover," said the hen-wife gravely, "Our Lady cannot lie. Only last night St. Barnabas, coming to tell me of my release from the body, spoke to me of Joan, though why you mind it,

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I know not, for what is the girl to you?"

"What did he say? What? What?" cried Dudleigh, shaking her, for she was dying fast before him and he must know the truth.

"Our Lady asked St. John if all was well with the girl Joan," said the hen-wife, with the snow drifting over her old shoulders, "and the blessed saint spoke as follows:

"'Madam, and Queen of Heaven,' he said, 'even now Joan is well married to the grandson of a wealthy noble, of whom all his kin died a week ago in a storm at sea, and his grandson will take his place in a few hours, and be lord of more land than his eye can see, and the father of a fine strong heir to be born tomorrow; but I am giving the old man twelve

hours' grace to save his soul in, for he is a very hard and sinful man, and I know how tender is the Virgin's heart!'

"And Our Lady thanked him and went to worshipping her son, being easy in her mind. And now I am dying, Hartover, and may God forgive you my cold death," said the hen-wife, and the snow covered her mouth, and her soul went out.

At that Dudleigh Hartover gave a great cry and ran out through the storm like a wild man, for he saw what a mean fool he had been to doubt Our Lady, and that his heart was rotted through with cruelty and wickedness, and his end near. And yet he could not repent of his blasphemies, but only of his sin against Joan, and as he ran through the drifts he called

aloud on her to forgive him, and to pray for him that he might believe to his salvation in the Power he had scorned. And as he stumbled through the biting snow, and knew how she must have suffered when he drove her into it, the tears froze on his face, and he staggered and fell, to die, as he thought. But his stiff hands touched a wooden door, and it pushed open before him and he saw a strange sight.

Outside, as I tell you, was the dark and the storm, but inside that shepherd's hut was all light, for just beyond the one pane shone a mighty silver Star that made the room a blaze. And there on the straw lay Joan with her new-born child beside her, but she was not alone; for all that mean hut was filled with angels, as Dudleigh Hart-

over plainly saw. And one washed the child in a silver bath and dried it with a towel so white that the eye ached at it, and the bath smelled of roses and lilies. And one wiped the mother's brow of sweat, and one played upon a great harp with strings so that the heart ached and swelled to tears to hear it. And one in a blue robe like St. Anne and a glory at her head, wrapped the child in a fleecy band, and one that held a lamb, and meek of face like St. Agnes, prayed at the mother's feet, she too with a glory. And in the far corner knelt the friendly shepherd and his son, that knew Joan well, signing themselves and praying. And a warm sweet air, all of roses and lilies, filled the place, and Young Dudleigh knelt between two cherubs who sang like birds

to the harp, making a lullaby for the new born, with tears upon his face, for he thought that they were all to die.

Then Old Dudleigh Hartover fell on his face, for he knew his end was come. And by the single pane, lit by the great silver Star, he saw a shadow glide, and it was the hen-wife, but wonderful white now, and with wings, and by her side, St. Barnabas, come to bear her company to heaven. And Old Dudleigh heard him say,

"Look, hen-wife, Our Lady gives you this sight to pay for your cold death. Is it not a tender one? Blessed are they who are born and die tonight!"

And at that Old Hartover's cruel heart was all melted and he prayed for grace and that Joan and the Virgin would forgive him ere he

died, and all the saints and angels in that room listened while Joan forgave him most sweetly and he confessed all his sins and died. And my grandmother held that her prayers and goodness saved him at the last, but I do not know as to that.

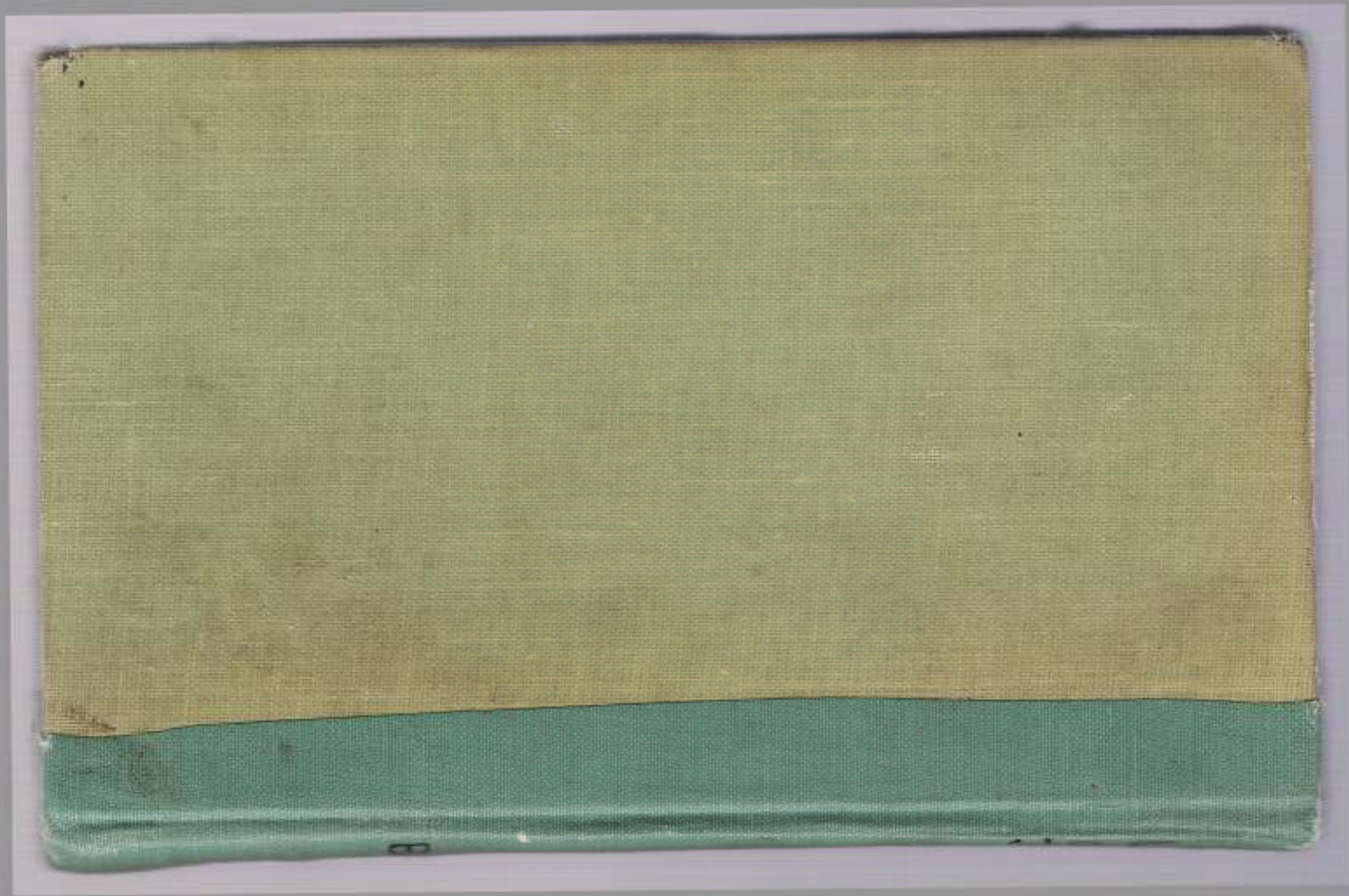
Now it is only right to say that there were many who held that the silver star was but Young Hartover's lanthorn and that the saints were the shepherd's wife and daughters, the silver bath but their pewter bowls, and the roses and lilies the fragrance of the new hay that smelled strong in that great fire they had made to keep her warm. And they say that the harps and the singing were but the little choir-boys singing in the early dawn with Father Victor against the high service, later, and the glories

on the women's heads were but the lanthorn's winking rays. And once I thought with these, but now that I am near my grandmother's age I say freely that I know naught of it, for sure, if the Blessed Ones are ever watching, 'twould be on Christmas Eve that they would be most like to honor Our Blessed Lord, and what could be more to His honor than what I have told you?

At any rate the Lady Joan believed it all and taught it to the young lord, her son, and put up a most beautiful chapel to the Virgin where that shepherd's hut had stood, and had masses for the hen-wife so long as she lived, for 't was to her, do you see, that she owed (under heaven) her luck.

But my grandmother would always say that *Joan's luck*, as

good fortune came to be called in that part of the countryside, was not what St. John got her (with Old Hartover's help) at all, but what heaven put in her at her birthday—a heart to love and hands to be doing with for those she loved; and now that I am my grandmother's age, and have seen much of women and the world God put 'em in, I think the old lady was right!



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